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Christ the King & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Cody & Powell, WY

Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2024

Text: Joel 2:12-19

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Those are the words typically said on Ash Wednesday as ashes are placed upon the heads of God’s people. Those words remind us that we are creatures whose origin is in the dust of God’s original creation. God made Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life. Eve was created from Adam’s rib. She too came from the dust of the earth and was enlivened by the breath of God.

But those words also remind of the devastating consequences sin and rebellion have brought to every human being. And to dust you shall return. The wages of sin is death. Those words remind us that we are all dying. Your initial reaction might be one of horror or denial. Who wants to contemplate such a grim reality. But Psalm 90:12 instructs us, “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” None of us knows the exact number of days given to us. But a heart of wisdom – and I will hasten to add! – a heart filled with joy, courage, and peace knows the days of life in this world are numbered. Remember that you are dust. Yes, yes! Created in God’s image. And to dust you shall return. Yes, yes. Death comes to us all. But these numbered days, marked by God’s wisdom, are filled with returning to the Lord God who is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Today, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of this year’s journey to the cross. Throughout these next six weeks, we will give particular attention to the Old Testament texts appointed for those services or the Old Testament reading from the previous Sunday. Even though these texts are thousands of

years old, they are inspired by the Holy Spirit so that we can rightly number our days in repentance, joy, and peace. Ultimately, they direct us to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our Christian faith.

Today, we begin with the prophet Joel 2:12–19. The Lord, speaking through His prophet, says (vs. 12-13), “Yet even now, return to the me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” Lent begins with a solemn, powerful call to repentance. Turn away from sin and return to the Lord! Repentance, turning away from sin and self-rule is a gift we need from God every day, not just during the weeks of Lent. The right and godly response to knowing that we are dust and returning to dust is repentance. Repentance is nothing less that returning to God in faith, love, and devotion.

Throughout human history, men, women, and children have recognized their need to return to God. In order to demonstrate this spiritual need in tangible ways, people have often torn their clothing, covered themselves with dust, and gone without food and drink for a period of time. All such practices have their proper place. But the outward actions must reveal something deeper. Joel preached, “Rend your hearts and not your garments” (vs. 13). A wise heart is a broken heart that then, in turn, seeks the mercies of God in Christ.

Psalm 51 is one of the best prayers of repentance and faith one can find. King David prayed, “A broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise” (Ps. 51:17). God receives such a heart as a pleasing sacrifice. Knowing that the Lord God is gracious, merciful, and abounding in steadfast love, David prayed (Ps. 51:12), “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” Those who rightly number their days with repentance and faith also find God’s love and mercy; such is a truly wise and joyful life.

The Lenten season is one of the most joyous, enriching times of the year! Some might find such a claim astonishing. Aren’t we supposed to increase our struggle against sin, acknowledge our sinfulness, and rend our hearts in

repentance? Yes, all true!! Through repentance, fasting, and prayer, we Christians take death, and evil, and the devil all quite seriously. But by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we give all the more attention, much more attention and devotion to the One to whom we return! “Return to the Lord your God.”

Lent is about returning to Jesus and embracing Him through faith, love, and devotion guided by God’s Word and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Because of Him and His precious blood shed on Calvary’s cross and because of His glorious resurrection from the dead, the day of disaster can be avoided. Joel described God as He who relents over disaster (vs. 13). The disaster of physical and eternal death has been changed, transformed for all Christian believers because of Jesus!

We Christians number our days in repentance and faith knowing that Jesus claims and redeems every milli-second of our lives. Our sicknesses, diseases, maladies, and every form of suffering has been redeemed because Jesus’ body was broken, marred, and bruised unto death on the cross. Every sin is forgiven. And we Christians stare death in the face as say, “O Death where is your sting?...Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Jesus transforms our physical death into the occasion for our soul to enter into His glorious presence in heaven. Our physical bodies, that glorious creation of God from the dust of the earth, will not stay in the dust of the earth. Our bodies will be resurrected in glorious splendor on the Last Day.

The Church calls for solemn assemblies. We remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Throughout those intervening days, we return to the Lord. In Him, we find steadfast love, grace and mercy, as well as renewed strength and divine, joyous life.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.